

READING CONRAD: MELANCHOLY IN THE SHADOW OF THE SWASTIKA

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There is a nice hesitation in the conference title: “The Reception of the work of Joseph Conrad: Readers Real and Implied”. Is the implied reader here the sort of intellectual construction which Wolfgang Iser and others – say Stanley Fish, or Jane Tompkins – argued inhabits all literary works? A would-be formalistically composed reader whom we deduce from the written work? In that case this implies, so to speak, that we construct a more or less “ideal” reader; ideal in several senses – a reader I have an idea of, a perfect reader, or a reader I imagine the writer was thinking he or she was writing for. Zdzisław Najder has already fruitfully elaborated on the implications of some of these models.

But there is another sense of implied reader of which I am thinking, in my imagining how real individuals might have read Conrad, even if in historical reality we know they did not. In part this could be a game. How would Wordsworth have read Rilke? Or John Keats the lyrics of Bob Dylan (a comparison which the critic Christopher Ricks has been keen to foster)? How would late Shakespeare, the old man of “King Lear” or “The Tempest”, have read Samuel Beckett’s “Endgame”? How Oscar Wilde, Thomas Mann’s “The Death in Venice”? What I am calling an “imaginary reader” might be figured in Dickens not having read Kafka, himself a keen reader of Dickens. The story by Jorge Luis Borges, “Kafka and his Precursors”, shows how we can fundamentally re-imagine Dickens” *Bleak House*, say, with its case of Jarndyce versus Jarndyce, when Kafka comes along with a story of almost unending trial. We may then see Dickens afresh through Kafka’s sadly piercing eyes.¹

So both imaginary and real readers of Conrad will be my topic here. In a recent book on the politics of the cultural reception of Joseph Conrad in Germany, I explored

¹ “Kafka and His Precursors.” *Labyrinths*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970.

how he came to be translated and read, and detailed this from the 1920s on.² For my present purposes I want to extend my argument by focussing on two further ideas: that of writerly melancholy and of the idea of a “culture in defeat” as a joint perspective for Conrad’s reception in the shadow of the Third Reich. Shadows are of course longer or shorter, and can project backwards and forwards, depending on the light source, so I will be a little flexible with my historical range.

My two imaginary readers of Conrad are Franz Kafka and Walter Benjamin, both deeply melancholic people, but as writers in a period of increasing fears of totalitarianism, they found precisely in this melancholy a resistant spirit which produced remarkably resilient work.

First let us imagine Franz Kafka reading Joseph Conrad or Conrad reading Kafka. They were near contemporaries. Kafka was born some 25 years after Conrad, in 1883; they died in the same year, 1924. So we might picture the implied Kafka discovering, with a depressed pleasure of recognition, this early sentence in *The Secret Agent*, as Mr. Verloc walks from his home towards an unidentified foreign embassy in Belgravia.

A guilty-looking cat issuing from under the stones ran for a while in front of Mr. Verloc, then dived into another basement; and a thick police constable, looking a stranger to every emotion, as if he too were part of inorganic nature, surging apparently out of a lamp-post, took not the slightest notice of Mr. Verloc. With a turn to the left Mr. Verloc pursued his way along a narrow street by the side of a yellow wall which, for some inscrutable reason, had No. 1 Chesham Square written on it in black letters. Chesham Square was at least sixty yards away, and Mr. Verloc, cosmopolitan enough not to be deceived by London topographical mysteries, held on steadily, without a sign of surprise or indignation. (SA 14)

This, in my now new reading of it seen through the lens of Kafka, is a brilliant Kafkaesque paragraph, full of the strangeness of the ordinary, the logic of the illogical and also the impression of someone perceiving life slightly from the outside. The scene seems slightly threatening, slightly humorous and certainly not fully intelligible. But it is one demanding composure. We hardly need to move to the next pages of Conrad’s novel, the surreal politics of Verloc’s interview with Privy Councillor Wurmt complaining about Verloc’s secret reports, and then to Verloc’s conversation with Mr. Vladimir, to feel, as with Kafka, we are in the country of mixed truths and of an intimidating and banal politics of everyday terrorism and state power.

By the same token, Conrad may have “enjoyed”, if that is the right word, Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony”, with its remorseless punishment machine, or the depressing gloom and macabre humour of Kafka’s *Der Prozess* / *The Trial*. In it, as we will remember, Joseph K. is arrested because “someone must have been telling lies about [him].”³ For Kafka read Conrad! In *Under Western Eyes* “our” Joseph K, as it were,

² Anthony Fothergill. *Secret Sharers: Joseph Conrad's Cultural Reception in Germany*. Oxford, Bern, New York: Peter Lang, 2006.

³ Franz Kafka. *Der Prozess*. Frankfurt: Fischer, 1960, 7.

has Razumov thrown into a phantasmagoric political nightmare of lies and deceit, because his student acquaintance, Victor Haldin, misunderstands his withdrawn silence as a sign of revolutionary complicity. A misinterpretation leads to betrayal and death.

Conrad may have been even more intrigued to learn from Kafka's letters and diaries about his uncle, Joseph Loewy, though he might almost have bumped into him personally when he, Conrad, was landing in Belgium in mid-January 1891, ill and seriously depressed from the horrors of his Congo trip. For Joseph Loewy, a trading merchant in Central Africa, was leaving Ostend at the same time as Conrad was arriving.⁴ Loewy was going out to the Congo to work in the employment of King Leopold for the Société Anonyme Belge pour le Commerce du Haut-Congo. He had received his appointment through the good offices of Albert Thys, the Director of the company in Brussels, the same Thys who employed Conrad, and who is depicted as the plump director in the "sepuchral city" of Brussels, in *Heart of Darkness*. Loewy was travelling to Boma, on the Congo River, to help in the building of the railway which Conrad describes in *Heart of Darkness*.

Had Kafka read Conrad's almost surreal description in that novella of this railway-building project he doubtless would have recognized in it his Uncle Joseph's memories on which he had drawn for prose fragments on railway building in the Congo and Russia.⁵ In their depiction of futility mixed with extreme exploitation and cruelty both Conrad's and Kafka's texts seem to prefigure in an awful way the concentration camps and *that* banality of evil, with *their* accountants keeping the books straight.

Talking of accountants I note that having been Chief Accountant in Matadi from 1892 to 1893, just missing Conrad by a year or so, by 1898 Joseph Loewy, as the director of the entire Congo trading division, received a gold medal from King Leopold in a ceremony marking the completion of the railway. By that time Kafka was 15, and Conrad was ... beginning to write about "the grove of death" and the immaculate Chief Accountant in *Heart of Darkness*. Kafka records his uncle saying later, "It was no easy life that I was leading then, building the railway in the middle of the Congo."⁶ For all the bizarre parallelism and differences, Conrad would at least have agreed with Kafka's Uncle Joseph on *that*.

One can sometimes try to picture what such imaginary readers might have made of their readings and that means to try to understand what one understands by the two

⁴ W.G. Sebald asserts in his chapter on Joseph Conrad and Roger Casement in *The Rings of Saturn*. London: Vintage, 2002, 121, that Conrad arrived back in Europe at Ostend, from which Loewy did indeed depart. Other biographers of Conrad, for example Najder, are less definitive about clear evidence for this. But it makes a good story.

⁵ See Franz Kafka. *Kritische Ausgabe. Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente*. Vol. 1. Ed. Malcolm Pasley. Frankfurt: Fischer, 1993, 333–334 and *Tagebücher*. Vol. 2. Ed. Hans-Gerd Koch. Frankfurt: Fischer, 1994, 169 ff.

⁶ Franz Kafka *Gesammelte Werke*. Vol. 5. Ed. Max Brod. Frankfurt: Fischer, 1983, 47.

writers being found somehow “in conversation”. We sometimes say that when we read a book we see the world through the eyes of its writer. But *part* of that world *is* other books, novels, other people’s ways of aesthetic looking. My second imaginary reader of Conrad is Walter Benjamin, writing under the sign of Saturn, as he put it, the sign of melancholia. But my other cases will be “real” readers actually reading him in the Germany of the Weimar period and later, into the Third Reich.

In a famous passage in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” Benjamin writes:

There is a picture by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open and his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage, and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows towards the sky. What we call progress is *this* storm. (Thesis IX, *Illuminations*, 249; my corrected translation.)

We probably know Benjamin’s work best from his essay on “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility”, of 1936. He could still conceive then of the revolutionary potential of art in new technological forms, particularly photography and film. But his “Theses”, written in 1940, at a date when Benjamin was in forlorn flight from the Nazis who were now occupying France, the idea of revolutionary progress had given way to humankind’s stoical shoring up of the fragments against its ruins. Walter Benjamin’s bleak vision of human history is that of a *natural history of destruction*. It can almost stand for the melancholic view of history par excellence. Two aspects are worth highlighting here. First the idea of ruin and destruction as the real content of history, in contrast to the ideological thrust of the belief in human progress. The second raises the question of whether, and if so how, this can be seen by the human participant, subject to this process.

For Benjamin, and, I would argue, for Conrad, the melancholic narrator of historical change can perceive and voice these visions, although Benjamin is ambiguous: Can only the Angel see this? As far as Conrad is concerned, I cannot *not* connect the image with that of Jasper Allen at the end of “Freya of the Seven Isles”. You will remember how towards the fateful outcome of a fairly melodramatic tale of young love and hope for the future for Freya and Jasper, Heemskirk, the jealous and powerful rival to Jasper arrests him and his beloved boat the “Bonito” on false charges of gun-running. Heemskirk engineers the wrecking of the “Bonito” on a reef en route for port where Jasper will have to go to court. The destruction of his brig, which along with Freya is the love of his life, drives him mad. Perhaps what is worse is the *visiblity* of it as a stranded ruin – it does not sink; it is stuck on the reef. It is lost and yet still there. This sense of loss and death living on, is almost a definition of the state of melancholy. Jasper spends the rest of his mad days staring fixedly out across the reef

to where his boat “Bonito” lies, “once the home of an exulting hope and now, in her inclined desolate immobility, towering above the lonely sea-horizon, a symbol of despair”. (*Twixt*, 229)

Perhaps this comparison with Benjamin’s angel is trivial. Benjamin undoubtedly intended his interpretation of the Klee picture to be read as a sort of politics or philosophy of history. But Conrad is writing novels, not philosophy. He is capturing at a personalized level what Benjamin is taking at an albeit metaphorical one, which he wants to generalize into a melancholic encapsulation of human historical “progress”. For Jasper, and imaginatively the reader, a world of hope is lying in utter ruin. All Jasper can do is stare. As Benjamin suggests, the melancholic view, even the Angel’s, is unable to detach itself from the lost object, or its ruins. However as we have seen with Benjamin, Conrad, can both fully imagine, know, the Angel’s or humankind’s fixed desperate gaze, and also portray it for us. Or at least portray their interpretation of it.

I can imagine Conrad reading the Benjamin passage and passing it on to Cunninghame Graham as yet more sustenance for the pessimistic or as Conrad would see it “realistic” view of life which he otherwise uttered in letters to him, as his Sancho Panza to Graham’s Don Quixote, mocking him for the naivety of his belief in human possibilities and the benign forces in historical movements.

In his essay on Kafka, Walter Benjamin also evokes Cervantes’ story to describe the roles played between the idealist romantic and his faithful servant. In a way, we can understand Kafka’s and Conrad’s melancholic humour – what we tend to call Conrad’s sceptical irony – as an antidote to the impossibilities of hoping for some form of early redemption. Benjamin’s Angel is forced to look back on the shattered monuments of human achievement. Conrad’s even more pessimistic view envisages the death of the universe. In the meantime “the attitude of cold unconcern is the only reasonable one”. (*LCG*, 65) As Kafka put it somewhere, denying he was an out-and-out pessimist: “Yes there is hope, eternal hope for a better life. But not for us.”

In the pessimism stakes Conrad might have found this rather too hopeful from a philosophical viewpoint. But his was partially driven by the melancholia from which he suffered throughout his life. Unlike the triumphal return of Kafka’s Uncle Joseph Loewy to Brussels from the Congo, we know that Conrad’s was visited by severe illness and depression, but as only one such instalment in his life.

Biographies of Conrad variously record his psychological situation. Zdzisław Najder’s biography sensibly argues about the difficulties of diagnosing the medical realities, whether physical or mental, of the illnesses Conrad suffered. But he argues that all the symptoms mentioned in letters “show he suffered from pathological depression” which had somatic outcomes – sadness, a feeling of incapacity, fatigue, anxiety coupled with listlessness, continual self-reproach. These typical symptoms

were all at some point present in Conrad's life.⁷ Cedric Watts agrees with this description of Conrad's malaise but tends also to place it in a broader philosophical cultural tradition, alluding to the late nineteenth century pessimistic outlook of those influenced by such as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, and holding to scientific views of the end of the human race, views so potently expressed by Conrad in his many well-known letters to Cunninghame Graham.⁸

A letter Conrad wrote to Marguerite Poradowska on 23 March 1890 is a virtual anthem to the melancholic tropes of depression, meaninglessness and the painfulness of the journey through life which any reasonably aware person makes. For Conrad, melancholy is thus a concomitant of consciousness.

Life rolls on in bitter waves, like the gloomy and brutal ocean under a sky covered with mournful clouds, and there are some days when to the poor souls embarked on the desperate voyage it seems not a ray of sun has ever been able to penetrate that sad veil; that never again will it shine, that it never even existed. [...] Above all we must forgive the unhappy souls who have elected to make the pilgrimage on foot, who skirt the shore and look uncomprehendingly upon the horror of the struggle, the joy of victory, the profound hopelessness of the vanquished. (CL 1, 43)

We should note here, of course, the aesthetic self-consciousness with which this account is given. But what seems not in doubt is that whatever the causes, he suffered from melancholia, what we now call "clinical depression".

Freud's seminal essay on "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917) was one of a number which, significantly I think, were written during and after the First World War and within *its* shadow.⁹ What the essays share is an attempt on Freud's part to extend the implications of his till-then individual models of psychological drama into a broader social and cultural context, as is indicated in such essays as "Civilisation and Its Discontents", or, encouraged by a suggestion from Albert Einstein, his thoughts on "Why War?". "Mourning and Melancholia" has become the classic starting point for 20th century commentaries on the nature of melancholia, in its individual and cultural forms. Against perhaps common assumptions about his writing, Freud shows a clear willingness to admit that the definitions of these terms are less than sharp. Although both states bare strong similarity, mourning (Trauer) follows a personal loss that has really occurred and which in time will be "healed" by the attachment to a new love-object. With melancholia there are all the same symptoms but it is unclear what object has been lost. The loss is unconscious. "It must be admitted". Freud writes with a certain discomfort, "that a loss has indeed occurred without its being known what

⁷ Zdzisław Najder. *Joseph Conrad. A Chronicle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, 144 ff.

⁸ See Cedric Watts. *A Preface to Conrad*. London: Longman, 1982.

⁹ Sigmund Freud. "Mourning and Melancholia." *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2005.

has been lost”.¹⁰ Almost uncannily, this sense of melancholia without a cause is expressed in a letter Conrad writes to Edward Garnett (2 June 1896):

I have long fits of depression, that in a lunatic asylum would be called madness. I do not know what it is. It springs from nothing It is ghastly. It lasts an hour or a day; and when it departs it leaves a fear. (*CL I*, 284)

For my purposes, another sentence in the essay is interesting as it broadens the issue out from the biographically personal into the historical-cultural context, understood as personal. Freud says that “mourning is commonly the reaction to the loss of a beloved person or [to the loss] of an abstraction taking the place of a person, such as fatherland, freedom, an ideal and so on. In some people, whom we for this reason suspect of having a pathological disposition, melancholia appears in place of mourning”. (203) In other words, mourning and melancholy have in principle similar causes or reasons. They differ only insofar as what brings about mourning is external and nameable or identifiable – the object of mourning. In the state of melancholy it is usually not. Here the “illness” melancholy in analysis takes the place of the mourned-for object. But, I would add, there is one more turn: While Freud writes from the perspective of the doctor seeking to “cure”, Conrad’s writing seems to offer for his readers an almost positive turn to this historically well-known condition.

This opens wide the doors for melancholia to be understood in terms of displaced experiences of loss at a broad cultural historical level, which are not consciously articulated. It ties in well with the common usage of melancholy as we associate it with a larger “philosophical” *Weltanschauung*: that Hamletian “*Weltschmerz*”; the vague sense that the world itself has lost meaning, that the time is out of joint. It can even embrace the notion of there being a form of “national mourning”. The historical looseness of the terms embrace both individual clinical depression but also a form of cultural melancholia which may encompass a world-view generated not exclusively by the personal experience of loss and destruction, but one envisaged at a broader political-historical level.

My argument is that the sceptically ironic, even melancholic, world-view so much in evidence in Conrad, found a particularly strong resonance in what I want to call a “culture in defeat”, such as prevailed for many anti-fascist German readers living under the shadow of the Swastika. I am not saying that to understand him, you or they, too, had to suffer from melancholic depression. Rather that their political cultural climate of defeat was one within which the complexity of his vision found particularly rich soil in which to grow, and that it answered their needs, that it found a readerly resonance which requires to be historically understood.

Conrad himself might have been sympathetic to the term “culture in defeat” even if my present application of it to his *German* readership might have raised an eyebrow. In a letter to Edward Garnett in October 1907, Conrad is anxious that Garnett

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, 203.

does not censor out some of the more vituperative “gems” of a draft letter Conrad is writing to the Daily Mail, opposing theatre censorship. “I am proud of my stately invective combined with the art of putting the finger to the nose.”

You remember always that I am a Slav (it’s your *idée fixe*) but you seem to forget that I am a Pole. You forget that we have been used to go to battle without illusions. It’s you Britishers that “go in to win” only. We have been “going in” these last hundred years repeatedly, to be knocked on the head only – as was visible to any calm intellect. (CL 3, 492)

A national “culture in defeat” seems implicit in Conrad’s own anticipatory sense of failure in the fight they are undertaking against literary censorship.

My phrase “the culture in defeat” plays on the title of a book by the cultural historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat*, which carries the subtitle *National Trauma, Mourning and Recovery*. It describes the immediate reaction in Germany to its defeat in the First World War as one of loss and trauma. He shows how fascism took political advantage and sought to rewrite German history by generating the myth of the “stab in the back”. This “justified” its own ruthless rise and the suppression of all opposition.

But at the moment I want to give the phrase a new turn, a different pedigree, by suggesting that by the mid-1930s a second “culture *in* defeat” was experienced in Germany by those who in the Weimar Republic had opposed fascism from the early 1920s onwards, be they Communists, Social Democrats, non-party liberal humanists or traditional conservatives. With the successful onslaught of Nazism they experienced their own new “culture in defeat”, their sense of the loss of the political culture they had been trying to develop. Further, I will argue that in Conrad’s writing, even in its melancholy, or rather *precisely within* its stoical melancholic outlook, they found, paradoxically, a form of cultural resistance to the forces of “Fate” that they too were suffering in the shape of Nazi oppression and terror.

It is in the spirit of that kind of *melancholy as resistance* that I now turn to actual readers of Conrad in the shadow of the Third Reich, to exemplify how even in those dark times, as Brecht called them, the most sceptical of writers provided succour to those who opposed the regime. And remember Brecht’s lines: “He who is still laughing just has not yet heard the terrible news.”¹¹ I only have time for two or three examples. But they could easily be multiplied.

Maryla Mazurkiewicz Reifenberg, a Polish-born journalist, wrote a number of essays on Conrad for the pages of the left liberal *Frankfurter Zeitung*. Her husband Benno Reifenberg edited the “Feuilleton” (cultural) section of that newspaper. She was in many ways an ideal reader of Conrad, sharing his Polish sensibilities. Her first review essay was on Conrad’s “Freya of the Seven Isles” (*Frankfurter Zeitung*, June

¹¹ “To Those Who Come After”/“An die Nachgeborenen” (1938). *Bertolt Brecht: Poems 1913–1956*. Transl. John Willett and Ralph Manheim. London: Eyre Methuen, 1976.

1929).¹² This was already becoming a difficult period in the chaos of Weimar culture for those like the Reifensbergs with liberal anti-fascist views. Her later essays on him were written from 1934 to 1938, which saw the political cultural situation for these “defeated” liberals in Germany growing increasingly bleak. So it is particularly interesting to read in her thoughts on Conrad something like a *disguised commentary* on her own position and that of fellow liberal Germans. A form of internal dissidence can be heard in the way she mobilised the “older” literature of her compatriot *to articulate in camouflage* her own sentiments about loyalty, suffering and human allegiances.

Let the “Freya” essay stand as the example. In Germany the story enjoyed far greater popularity when it came out as a single work in 1929, running to five editions by 1939, than it had received in Britain. This is in no small measure due the notable readings early German reviewers like Maryla Reifenberg brought to Conrad.

Her understanding of the story widens our perspective on it and allows us to recognize its genuinely tragic rendering of the ideals of love and human passion in the face of overwhelming and corrupt judicial and political forces. After praising the novella for having the stylistic rhythm of a grandiose ballad with increasingly tragic refrains, she shows how Conrad portrays the burden of fate of these wandering lovers with an unrelenting persistence.

And then, when things are at their worst, when human beings are expected to endure the most inhuman suffering, Conrad, with a simple gesture of wonderful compassion, lets the story glide out of his hands. The finale of the story is reported [by Freya’s father] in the pitiful voice of one of those who were also affected by the suffering. Through the sound of the broken human voice those whose frightful fate has snatched them away have been called back into the community of humankind. But *they* do not have any home there any more. They slide inexorably over into another unnameable community. Like a bitter tear into the ocean’s waters.

This story alone, Reifenberg says, would give us leave to recognize one of the noblest and most moving of writers. Even if in the tale itself the narrative describes the *failed* attempt to speak the truth out to a hostile community unwilling to listen – the truth of Jasper’s plight is not brought to light by the authorities – at least *that* fact has been heard through Conrad’s melancholic voice. As such, for Reifenberg the story signals both defeat *and* resilience in the face of it.

Her high praise resonates constantly throughout her later essays on him. There is constant attention to his independence of perspective, conjoined with his unconditional sense of the need to confront whatever was flung against him in the form of “fate.”

This independence in Conrad is legitimized by way of an unconditional feeling of responsibility, by the strongest sense of conscience. Conrad’s conscience, independence, compassion

¹² This, like most of her articles can be found alongside other unpublished material in the (Benno) Reifenberg-Nachlass, housed in the Deutsche Literaturarchiv in Marbach am Neckar. Two boxes are devoted to Maryla Reifenberg’s papers. I quote from the manuscript.

and courage are as inexhaustible as the sea. And how unremitting he was towards himself in this! How strong is his resistance against accepting something which he cannot answer to in his own heart.¹³

It is impossible, I would argue, not to hear in her homage to Conrad's moral humanity, the recognition of a voice which could speak to the beleaguered humane minds which were threatened in *her* day, in their culture in defeat.

Their shared Polish background made her alert to his position between East and West. Perhaps the title she gave to her longest essay on him, "Polarstern" (Pole Star) can pun on that Polish origin but primarily it asserts a sense of unalterable orientation with its appropriately Conradian maritime associations. Occasioned by the serialised publication of *An Outcast of the Islands* in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* of October 1934, the essay is billed both as an introduction to the novel and more generally as a commemoration of the author on the tenth anniversary of his death. Drawing on Conrad's letters as well as other novels Reifenberg portrays him as a man of resolute independence and humane sympathies and as an exemplar of values so essential to the survival of the sort of Europe she wrote for.¹⁴ As for herself, this unswerving orientation took the form not of an open, outspoken political resistance in her journalism. That would have been literally fatal. Rather it was a way of remaining, as she saw Conrad doing, duty-bound to an indestructible sense of the truth. She was able to use Conrad, and the relative "innocence" of writing on a dead author, to show to Germans of the late 1930s an image of such rectitude, to learn from it that the truth cannot ultimately be suppressed; that hypocrisy and lies, inhumanity and suffering can be overcome.

A similar tenor can be heard in the writings of Hermann Stresau on Conrad in the late Thirties, especially in his study, *Joseph Conrad, Tragiker des Westerns* (1937), the first substantial German monograph on Conrad. There was a provocative political context for its publication. In November 1936 Wilhelm Stapel, high up in the Nazi cultural machine, published a widely-distributed pamphlet on *The Literary Domination of the Jews in Germany 1918–1933*, part of the Nazi attack on anti-Nazi political and literary culture. In it Joseph Conrad, falsely decried as "the Polish Jew", featured prominently in proof of the alleged fact that German "Kultur" was being undermined by cosmopolitan Jewish publishing interests, including Conrad's German publishers Fischer Verlag. Stresau had been sacked from his librarian's job by the Nazis on trumped-up charges of "Bolshevik sympathies". He now allied with Fischer Verlag to demand a retraction and used the opportunity to bring out more Conrad in its house journal, the *Neue Rundschau*, and by this to ridicule Stapel. The strategy worked for a time, and Stresau's book came out in the wake of the rumpus.

¹³ Maryla Reifenberg, "Polarstern." *Frankfurter Zeitung*. 10 October 1934. Reifenberg-Nachlass. *Prosa Sammlung*. Box 1. Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Marbach.

¹⁴ The letters are from Jean-Aubry's edition of *Lettres françaises*. Paris: Gallimard, 1930, and others that had been serialized in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* of October 1933.

There is a sense in which Stresau and Conrad enjoyed elective affinities. Like Conrad's, Stresau's own background was cosmopolitan. Born of German stock in 1894 in the USA, he emigrated to Germany as a teenager, where, in 1914, he volunteered for service in the German army. For Stresau, Conrad was "der unbehauste Tragiker des Westens", the "unhoused tragic writer of the Western world", a description that accords with Stresau's own life. Through these primary epithets, "unhoused" and "tragic", Stresau reads and finds ethical solidarity with Conrad. The terms in which he depicts Conrad resonated among many like-minded contemporaries of Stresau: Conrad's ironically sceptical, fateful confrontation with a hostile, even absurd reality, must have spoken to the experience of many of the inter-war generation. But Stresau also finds in Conrad the confirmation of a kind of value, the ability to live life without romantic illusions. The Conradian sense of being "unhoused", never being quite "at home", neither in bourgeois civilisation nor in nature (true for Conrad at a biographical level), became for Stresau a persuasive trope. He sees Conrad as implicitly voicing the conditions of his, Stresau's, historical moment.

English translations of "Tragiker" as "tragic writer" or "tragedian" are too limited in their links to drama. With "Tragiker" Stresau points to a fundamentally melancholic frame of mind, a stoic vision, which ties Conrad to a sort of "fate" (Schicksal), in itself undefinable. This is confronted, however, with fortitude, sobriety and tragic perseverance. Generally, "Schicksal" covers three semantic areas which we might translate variously as "fate", "chance" and "destiny". It is also a word which at the time of Stresau's writing and still in some quarters today, carries weighty political-cultural connotations. One thinks of "Manifest Destiny", current in American ideology from the middle of the 1800s, with its implicit legitimizing of expansionism. Nazism was not short of such usages in justifying both Hitler's Lebensraum policy and Germany's domination in Europe and its invasion of Russia. But the dominant meaning of "Schicksal" in German, and in Stresau's own use, strongly implies that which is fated, sent by the gods, without its being willed or controlled by men. Furthermore, says Stresau, for Conrad it is like a storm in nature, that which simply *is*, and needs to be endured. It is without inherent meaning but cannot be avoided. Stresau associates this with the word "Wirklichkeit" (reality) which can be life-threatening but cannot be bypassed through self-delusion or, indeed, commonly-held social illusions. The melancholic tragic consists in the acknowledgement of this reality.

Far from seeing Conrad as a writer of exotic adventure, easily moving from being a seaman to becoming a novelist writing about the sea, Stresau perceives Conrad as being driven into a life-role, not embracing it. Even the stormy seascape prominent in so many of his novels is merely a backdrop, the embodiment of an ineluctable reality, through the confrontation with which one finds one's own humane grounding. It is thus not surprising that Stresau concentrates on such figures as Lord Jim, Heyst, Tom Lingard and Marlow, who by finally acknowledging their own hopes and illusions within an indifferent universe find their authentic selves. But the condition for this tragic insight is an awareness of not being at home in the security of the societal

world. Here Stresau evokes this very powerful trope of “*der unbehauste Mensch*”, the unhoused, unaccommodated man. It is a motif full of terrible significance for those in the Germany of the 1930s and early 1940s who, in active or passive opposition to the Nazis, felt no longer at home in their homeland. What did “homeland” mean any more when it was not the place one felt at home in? Stresau uses the figure of Conrad and the ironic tragedy of his fiction to articulate a sensibility of desire and failure felt by those who came to adopt a form of “inner exile” as a means of survival and moral political resistance.

If one kind of Nazi construction of historical “national destiny” was what had driven most Germans in the increasingly catastrophic direction in which fascism was taking them, for Stresau and many other Germans like him, this was a “reality” which had to be acknowledged but could never be endorsed as valuable and humanely meaningful. Conrad’s individual depictions of such crises of conflict between illusions and reality therefore provided, for Stresau, fine models for the *alluding to, while not actually talking about*, the disastrous political and cultural crisis anti-fascist Germans were experiencing within their own culture in defeat and their daily suffering at the hands of the seemingly invincible enemy. For it was literally under pain of death that people sometimes did so talk. And explicit talk cost lives. But “reading between the lines”, as it were, like-minded contemporaries could find mutual solidarity through their encounters with the works of Conrad.

As one such exemplary reader my final reference will be to Lothar-Günther Buchheim, the novelist and renowned art collector. Buchheim’s enthusiasm for Conrad was spurred on early in the war when his publisher Peter Suhrkamp sent him (more or less banned) copies of Conrad’s works for his wartime reading. Buchheim is most famously known for his novel *Das Boot* (1973) on which was based the well-known film *Das Boot*, (dir. W. Petersen, 1984) about U-Boats in World War Two. Though written in 1973, the book is a “factional” version of Buchheim’s own experiences as a young war artist and correspondent on submarine U-96 in 1941-2, during the Battle for the Atlantic against the Allied merchant convoys. Narrated in the first person and present tense, the novel rhetorically suggests we are in 1941, with the young Buchheim. Of course the hindsight offered by forty years of reflection is part of the complexity of the novel, just as are Conrad’s reflections on his tale “Youth”. This was one of Buchheim’s favourite Conrad works and we could consider it to be an imaginative model for Buchheim’s own writing. I mention this time-gap because already in the narrated time of the novel (that is in 1941), the narrator shares with his U-boat captain (in real life Captain Heinrich Lehmann-Willenbrock) a sceptically ironic, not to say cynical, attitude towards the German Naval High Command and the “heroic” speech of the only Nazi party officer on board. The disillusion with the rhetoric of war, which Buchheim associates with that of jingoistic verse from World War One, renders his feeling, if not culturally defeated by the Nazi machine, at least unbelieving in any of its claims, and despairing of its terrible futility. The book was

rightfully called “anti-militaristic” by some later critics who regarded that as disparagement. It is into that context that I would place the following episode in the novel.

There is a heavy month-long storm at sea rendering any sort of “hunt and kill” orders pointless, though High Command still makes them:

The Commander totters his way through to the Officers’ Mess and settles himself firmly in his corner at the narrow end of the table. [...] All three of us keep our heads bent over our books. After a while he looks up. “Just read this! It’s a perfect description!”

I find the paragraph he’s pointing to.

“The caprice of the winds, like the wilfulness of men, is fraught with the disastrous consequences of self-indulgence. Long anger, the sense of [his] uncontrolled power, spoils the frank and generous nature of the West Wind. It is as if his heart were corrupted by a malevolent and brooding rancour. He devastates his own kingdom in the wantonness of his force. South-west is the quarter of the heavens where he presents his darkened brow. He breathes his rage in terrific squalls and overwhelms his realm with an inexhaustible welter of clouds. He strews the seeds of anxiety upon the decks of scudding ships, makes the foam-stripped ocean look old, and sprinkles with grey hairs the heads of ship-masters in the homeward-bound ships running for the Channel. The Westerly Wind asserting his sway from the south-west [quarter] is often like a monarch gone mad, driving forth with wild imprecations the most faithful of his courtiers to shipwreck, disaster, and death.”

I turn to the title page: Joseph Conrad. *The Mirror of the Sea*. (235–236)¹⁵

This is perhaps one of the most extraordinary situations in which to find Conrad being read in the shadow of the Swastika: at war against the British merchant navy, on a German submarine of all things. Furthermore, submarines were not among Conrad’s most favoured forms of maritime shipping.

The war correspondent Buchheim offers no immediate commentary on the citation from Conrad. Not, I think, because there is nothing worth saying about it but rather because it is *present beyond words*. For the Old Man, the Captain, and even more for Buchheim, Conrad somehow simply *is there* encapsulating meaning. Again and again in Buchheim’s writing, here and elsewhere, Conrad appears as a *literary epiphany*, as a guiding star. Had he read “Autocracy and War”, written at about the same time (1906), it would not have been hard for Buchheim to perceive beneath the geographical and natural metaphors a powerful historical and political resonance in Conrad’s words. In that essay Conrad talks of the growing threat to Poland from an imperial and almighty Germany, coming from Poland’s West. The political analogy with the storm-winds is clear. Suddenly the West Wind, a wilful and “cruel monarch gone mad, driving the most faithful to shipwreck, disaster and death”, can be seen as an actual insane political tyrant. Of course, again like Reifenberg and Stresau, Buchheim cannot allude directly to Nazi politics. And given the present-tense (1941) form of his novel, narratively it would have been inconsistent, let alone politically unrealistic, to be explicit. But the novel allows us to recognize that Buchheim recog-

¹⁵ The Conrad quotation is from *The Mirror of the Sea*, 83.

nizes in the passage a surrogate reference to political tyrannical forces, of which at the time they were only too aware, as he later confirmed to me in conversations.

At times in his writing Buchheim talks of himself as looking through Conrad's eyes and remembering through Conrad's memories and observations. He quotes long passages from Conrad (particularly from *The Mirror of the Sea*), which he knows by heart, and these then trigger his own recalled times. In *Der Luxusliner*, Buchheim's logbook record of a luxury cruise on the *QE 2*, but a cruise during which he is constantly recapturing his U-boat experiences, he cites from Conrad on the indifference of the sea to human desires and fate:

Faithful to no race after the manner of the kindly earth, receiving no impress from valour and toil and self-sacrifice, recognizing no finality of dominion, the sea has never adopted the cause of its masters like those lands where the victorious nations of mankind have taken root, rocking their cradles and setting up their grave stones. [...] As if it were too great, too mighty for common virtues, the ocean has no compassion, no faith, no law, no memory. Its fickleness is to be held true to men's purposes only by an undaunted resolution and by a sleepless, armed, jealous vigilance, in which, perhaps, there has always been more hate than love. (*Mirror*, 135 as cited in Buchheim)

Buchheim then continues:

In the war those were for me as words from a gospel. I knew the lines by heart. On watch [on the submarine] I would scan my 90 degree sector, reciting Conrad's sentences silently to myself – and now, reading them again, I am as I was then: I face head-on the lashing spray of the waves which with a pulverizing blow snatch the bow of our boat out of the green waters: “undaunted resolution and a sleepless, armed jealous vigilance.” (*Luxusliner*, 160–161)

As for Maryla Mazurkiewicz Reifenberg, as for Hermann Stresau and many others I could have talked of, reading Conrad's stoic, melancholic words meant for Buchheim finding a voice which could voice *his* sense of opposition to seemingly overwhelming forces as elementally cruel as Conrad's faithless, indifferent sea. The language may have been that of nature. But at heart it was a political historical voice, for a culture in defeat.

In W.G. Sebald we find a perfect formulation of this experience. Sebald, who composed a somewhat imaginative critical chapter on Conrad in *The Rings of Saturn*, a study written in the post-war shadow of the Third Reich, also sees melancholia as a form of aesthetic cultural resistance:

Melancholy, the contemplation of the movement of misfortune, has nothing to do in common with the wish to die. It is a form of resistance. And this emphatically so at the level of art. When, with rigid gaze, it [melancholy] goes over again just how things could have happened, it becomes clear that the dynamic of inconsolability and that of knowledge are identical in their execution. The description of misfortune includes within itself the possibility of its own overcoming.¹⁶

¹⁶ From the Foreword to W.G. Sebald. *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks*. Frankfurt: Fischer, 1994, 12.

That conjunction of melancholic inconsolability and resistant knowledge can be found in a tale Benjamin tells in his essay on Kafka. So I will return finally to my imaginary readers of Conrad and paraphrase Benjamin's tale: In a Hasidic village a group of men was sitting together in a scruffy inn, drinking and talking. They were all locals with the exception of one person no one knew, a poor old in torn rags, who was squatting in a dark corner of the room. The men around the table took to asking each other what, if they could have it granted, would be their deepest wish. Each went in turn. One longed for a bag of gold to buy the farm on which he slaved. The next dreamt of a fine son-in-law for his daughter. A third wished for a new work bench. Eventually they turned to the old beggar, who reluctantly answered their question.

I wish I was a powerful king reigning over a big country. Then, one night while I was asleep in my palace, an enemy would invade my country and by dawn his army would have penetrated to my castle, facing no resistance. Roused from my sleep with no time even to dress properly I would have to flee in my shirt. Rushing over hill and dale and through forests day and night, I would finally arrive safely here, at this bench in the corner. This is my wish.

His listeners were puzzled. Asked one of them: "And what good on earth would *this* wish have done you?" He answered, "I'd have a shirt."

The beggar's answer brings the others (and us as readers) up short and Benjamin does not "explain" the story, any more than Kafka does in his parables. On the surface, the tale seems to be anything but the expected wish escape-story with which it starts. Indeed with the beggar's negative dialectical turn of a utopian wish-fulfilment, a more melancholic reminder to his listeners of his actual forlorn material life could hardly be imagined. But the *showing* of that condition has its own effect; it is *realised* (made real through narration) and imaginatively realised by the listeners (which vicariously includes us as readers). So through story-telling, a sort of collective solidarity in destitution has been produced. The world as a place of suffering has not been illusorily wished away. But a community has found a resilient voice for it.

For those living in the shadow of the Swastika, Conrad's writing, as art, represented a form of melancholic resistance which could bring succour, if not redemption. I hope to have shown you this for some imaginary and real readers of Conrad in Germany, suffering within a culture of destruction and defeat.

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